A bipartisan deal on how to manage the nation’s water resources has potentially big implications for the Great Lakes and the region’s states — authorization of a nearly $1 billion project at the Soo Locks, movement on a plan to stop Asian carp, and more money to protect drinking water.

Signed into law in October, the Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) also establishes new programs to research the eradication of zebra mussels and Asian carp and to explore technologies that prevent harmful algal blooms in the Great Lakes.

The WRDA and its various provisions reflect the continued strength of the bipartisan Great Lakes delegation within the U.S. Congress. This group also has helped fend off multiple proposals by the Trump administration to gut the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative. In his most recent budget proposal, Trump called for eliminating the initiative altogether.

“It’s possible that there will be cuts to the overall [FY 2019] budget for the [U.S.] Environmental Protection Agency, but every indication is that funding for the GLRI will stay at its current level of $300 million a year,” says Matthew McKenna, director of the nonprofit Northeast-Midwest Institute’s Great Lakes Washington Program.

The recently signed WRDA, meanwhile, authorizes full funding for modernization of the Soo Locks, a linchpin of commercial navigation in the Great Lakes. Authorization is considered an essential step toward Congress ultimately appropriating money for the $922 million project.

Another high-priority proposal in this region would address concerns about Asian carp reaching the Great Lakes. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has a “temporarily selected plan” to install a mix of structural and nonstructural barriers at the Brandon Road Lock & Dam (part of the Chicago Area Waterway System). Most Great Lakes states support the Brandon Road project, but the host jurisdiction, Illinois, has expressed reservations about costs, as well as the impact on navigation and the regional economy.

The WRDA requires the Army Corps to “consult with the governor of the state in which the project is constructed” and boosts the federal cost-share for the project — up to 80 percent for operation-and-maintenance costs. (The typical cost-sharing arrangement is 65 percent federal and 35 percent local.) Michigan and other Great Lakes jurisdictions also have expressed an interest in helping fund the project.

Lastly, over the next three years, states and localities will have more federal resources (in the form of low-interest loans and grants) to upgrade their drinking water infrastructure — if actual appropriations for the Drinking Water State Revolving Fund meet authorization levels set in the new WRDA. The level for FY 2021 is $1.95 billion. In comparison, $1.16 billion was appropriated in FY 2018.
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